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THE WOMEN CHARACTERS OF CORNEILLE AND RACINE

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THE WOMEN CHARACTERS OF CORNEILLE AND RACINE

BY

VIRGINIA MERRILLS

THESIS

FOR THE

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23 Feb Illinois.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this essay is to discuss briefly the women characters of Corneille and Racine, showing their resemblances and differences. It is beyond the scope of the subject to analyze the plots and purposes of the plays of Corneille and Racine, and hence the reader is expected to be somewhat familiar with the plays which are used as the background of this essay.

The plays, upon which this essay is based are listed in the following bibliography.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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CHARACTERS TREATED

		Important		Confidentes
Corneille				
Le Cid	-	Chimène	-	Élvire
		L'Infante		Léonore
Horace	-	Sabine	-	Julie
		Camille		
Cinna	-	Émilie	-	Fulvie
		Livie		
Rodogune	-	Rodogune	-	Laonice
		Cléopatre		
Polyeucte	-	Pauline	-	Stratonice
Racine				
Andromaque	-	Andromaque	-	Céphise
		Hermione		Cléone
Phèdre	-	Phèdre	-	Oenone
		Aricie		Ismène
Athalie	-	Athalie		
		Josabeth		
Esther	-	Esther	-	Élise
Iphigenie	-	Iphigénie	-	
		Eriphile		Doris
		Clytemnestre		Aegine

I. THE WOMEN CHARACTERS OF CORNEILLE

The number of women characters in Corneille's plays is small in comparison with the number of men characters. Most of the plays have one or two leading women, one or two "confidentes" or "suivantes", and about eight or ten men characters. "Horace" and "Rodogune" have two leading women characters of almost equal importance. "Le Cid" and "Cinna" each have two noble women but not of equal importance. The roles of L'Infante in "Le Cid" and Livie in "Cinna" are very secondary. Since the tragedies are drawn from historical sources the characters have historical names, or names suited to the time of the play. "Horace", "Cinna" and "Polyeucte" represent Roman History and the leading women are of Roman nobility. The plot of "Le Cid" is drawn from Spanish History, and Chimène is from a noble family.

Each noble woman has a confidente, a characteristic which is very common in all dramatic literature of the 17th Century. "Le Grande Encyclopédie" defines the term "confidente" as follows. "Les confidentes sont des personnages subalternes de la tragédie et particulièrement de la tragédie française classique, auxquels les principaux personnages font leurs confidences; par aux les spectateurs se trouvent instruits des projects des acteurs, et apprennent les événements dont les confidentes sont généralement chargés de faire le récit." * The rôle of the confidente in the Corneillean drama complies

*La Grande Encyclopédie - Vol. 12, page 384.

with the above definition. The confidentes relate the incidents which happen behind the scenes and relieve the heroine from too lengthy a monologue. They share many secrets with the heroines and help them solve their difficulties. The confidentes are thus minor characters, but are more important than ordinary servants. Their presence in a play aids greatly in maintaining the three unities of time, place and action.

Corneille makes little differentiation between his men and women characters. His men are well protrayed as heroes but his women are too rational, and too much like the men. They do not have feminine qualities based upon emotion, and are therefore unnatural. Strong heroism is one of their main characteristics. Corneille himself said that he would rather be reproached for having made a woman too heroic than for having made a hero effeminate.* Corneille's aim was toward manliness, a characteristic which he gave to his women as well as to his men. One manly characteristic of these women is that they are political creations, and represent some phase of history. In "Horace" Sabine and Camille represent the struggle between Alba Longa and Rome. Émilie in "Cinna" represents the opposition to the emperor Augustus, and considers it her duty to obtain the liberty of Rome. She says,

"La Liberté de Rome est l'oeuvre d'Émilie."

Cinna Act I, scene 2, l. 110.

Cléopatre is political in that her greatest ambition is to rule the world. Pauline in "Polyeucte" is not political, but she is

*Faguet - En Lisant Corneille, page 98.

a personification, since she represents the penetration of Christianity into the Eastern World.

Another manly characteristic of Corneille's women is their great will power and reasoning. In trying to follow reason, however, they go to the extreme and become unreasonable. In this respect they are untrue to life. Chimène for example will not let herself become emotional, and acts unreasonably in her course against Rodrigue whom she really loves.

A very common characteristic of Corneille's women is their frequent use of the term "gloire". The Dictionary of the French Academy defines "gloire" as "L'honneur, l'estime, La louange, la réputation que les vertus, le mérite, les grandes qualités les grandes actions ou les bons ouvrages attirent à quelqu'un".* Corneille's women are always conscious of their duty and honor, and seem to be desirous of acting in accordance with their "gloire". In "Le Cid" Chimène says,

"Il y va de ma 'gloire'"

Act III, scene 3, l. 842.

Similar passages are found in "Horace", "Cinna","Rodogune" and "Polyeucte".

"Cette 'gloire' si chère, à ta brutalité!"

"Horace", Act IV, scene 5, l. 1294.

"Le bon et le mauvais sont égaux pour ta gloire"

"Cinna", Act I, scene 3, l. 262.

" * * * *ils souilleraient ma gloire"

"Polyeucte", Act II, scene 2, l. 550.

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*Dictionnaire de L'Académie Française 6th Ed. Vol. 1, p 840.

"Votre gloire le veut, l'amour vous le prescrit"

"Rodogune", Act III, scene 4, l. 1033.

The desire for revenge is very prominent among the heroïnes of Corneille. The plot of the play consists mainly in their trying to carry out their revenge. In "Le Cid" Chimène is trying to avenge the death of her father, Emilie in "Cinna", and Rodogune in "Rodogune" have the same purpose. Cléopatre seeks to avenge the death of her husband whose love she lost. Camille is anxious to avenge the death of her lover. Sabine and Pauline are exceptions to this rule for they are not revengeful. The women have one principal way of accomplishing their revenge, that is to offer a reward, usually themselves in marriage, to the one who will carry out the deed for them. Chimène promises to marry the man who brings to her the head of Rodrigue. Emilie promises to marry Cinna only when he shall have brought about the murdur of Augustus. Rodogune will marry Antiochus provided that he bring her the head of his mother.

"Pour gagner Rodogune il faut venger un père."

"Rodogune", Act III, scene 5, l. 1044.

Cléopatre differs from the others, since she offers the throne as the reward to the son who succeeds in murdering Rodogune.

The fact that these women offer themselves in marriage to him who carries out their revenge, shows that they have a high estimation of themselves.. They also think that they are worth dying for, and whoever desires to marry them should be willing to risk his life for them.

Emilie says to Maxime,

"Tu m'oses aimer, et tu n'oses mourir."

"Cinna", Act IV, scene 5, l. 1352.

Another unwomanly characteristic of the heroines is their self-control. They try to refrain from weeping and when they can not, they apologize for their lack of self-control. Frequently the confidente reminds her weeping mistress that she should control herself. In "Le Cid" Élvire tries to calm Chimène.

" * * * * * reprenez vos esprits"

" * * * * * modérez vos transports."

"Le Cid", Act IV, scene 1, l. 1124, l. 1142.

Sabine in "Horace" says,

"J'ai honte de montrer tant de mélancholie, et

mon coeur * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

Cherche la solitude à cacher ses soupirs."

"Horace", Act, I, scene 1, l. 132-134.

Since the women characters of Corneille are unreal we might expect them to be unreal in their love. In looking further into this, however, they are found to be more real in this respect than in any other. Faguet says that Corneille pictures true love, and in the feminine role is a master of it.* The tragedies are usually a conflict between love and duty. Corneille's idea of love was that it should be conquered by duty, and never be emotional. The women, although not emotional

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*Faguet - En lisant Corneille, page 103.

are sincere in their love. In "Le Cid", Chimène places duty before love, but in the end yields to love. Most of the heroines base their love on esteem. They love a man for his virtues and honor.

"Rodrigue a des vertus que je ne puis haïr."

"Le Cid" Act V, scene 7, l. 1803.

Pauline loves Sévère because, "Jamais Notre Rome

"n'a produit plus grand coeur, ni vu plus honnête homme."

"Polyeucte", Act I, scene 3, l. 182.

Corneille's women characters are all very much alike and possess the same characteristics, with the exception however, of Pauline and Sabine. These two are more emotional and act more like real women than the others, they thus do not belong to the general class to which all the other tragic heroines of Corneille belong.

II. THE WOMEN CHARACTERS OF RACINE

Women play the leading role in the plays of Racine. This may be expected since almost all of the plays receive their name from the heroines, whereas in Corneille it is usually the opposite. Although the plays contain about the same number of men as women, the men play a relatively minor part and the interest centers in the women characters. Racine uses antiquity and mythology as the basis of his plots, and consequently his women characters have names corresponding to the setting of the story. Most of the plays have two leading women of noble birth, but they are not of equal importance. To comply with the rules of French classic tragedy, Racine, like Corneille, makes use of the "confidente" or "suivante". In each play we find the noble woman accompanied by a confidente or maid in waiting. In "Esther" Racine breaks away from the Biblical story to give Esther the confidente Élise.

Racine is a portrayer of emotions, and dwells mostly upon love which he pictures as violent and impetuous, sometimes jealous and often criminal. His women are represented as struggling with internal troubles caused by their passions. They usually fail in their struggle, or at least are overcome by their emotion. Phèdre is one of Racine's most emotional characters. She becomes mad with jealousy and remorse when she hears that Hippolyte whom she loves, hates her and loves Aricie. She herself admits her madness for she tells her confidente

Oenone to serve her madness and not her reason.

"Sers ma fureur, Oenone, et non point ma raison."

"Phèdre", Act III, scene 1, l. 792.

Hermione in "Andromaque" likewise shows love driven to madness by jealousy. She too is very emotional. Her love has a criminal outcome for she is so jealous that another (Andromaque) should become the bride of Pyrrhus that she seeks his death. When her purpose however has been accomplished she becomes frantic and kills herself. Her emotion is varied, for her rage which at first is directed toward Pyrrhus is in the end turned toward Orestes.

"Tais-toi, perfide,

Et N'impute qu'à toi ton lâche parricide.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

Va, je la désavoue, et tu me fais horreur,

Barbare, qu'as-tu fait?"

"Andromaque", Act V, scene 3, l. 1533-1537.

Andromaque represents maternal love which is very pathetic and touching. Her eyes are almost always filled with tears, and she pours out her grief so as to touch the sympathy of the listeners.

"Dis lui que de mon fils l'amour est assez fort."

"Andromaque", Act III, scene 8, l. 1039.

"Que les pleurs de sa mère * * * * * * "

"Andromaque", Act I, scene 4, l. 374.

Clytemneste the mother of Iphigénie also represents maternal love, but she is not as emotional as Andromaque.

"De mes bras tout sanglants il faudra l'arracher."

Iphigénie, Act IV, scene 4, l. 1312.

In each of the above instances love dominates and triumphs over reason. Reason is so lacking in the minds of the characters that they are more human and natural than Corneille's characters.

Racine brings out, not the rational, but the emotional traits of humanity in his women whom he frequently represents as irresolute and wavering. Andromaque is constant in her purpose, but this purpose is of an emotional, and not reasonable character. Faithfulness to her former husband and love for her son alternate in their power over her. She is always in despair, and in the end resolves to resort to death, as the only way to free her soul from its tortures.

"J'irai seule rejoindre Hector et mes aïeux."

"Andromaque", Act IV, scene 1, l. 1099.

Will-power and strength of character so prominent in Corneille's women are entirely absent in Esther, who is represented as a true woman, timid and pathetic. The desire of humanity to free itself from burdens is shown in her confession before the king.

"Esther, seigneur eut un Juif pour son père,
De vos ordres sanglants vous savez la rigueur."

"Esther", Act, III, scene 4, l. 1033.

In her confession to Hippolyte, Phèdre portrays the same idea.

"Que dis-je? Cet aveu que je te viens de faire,
Cet aveu si honteux, le crois-tu volontaire?"

"Phèdre", Act II, scene 5, l. 693-694.

The meekness and calmness with which Iphigénie resigns herself to her destiny give her a touching and natural charm.

"Dieux plus doux-vous n'avez demandé que ma vie,
Mourons, * * * * obéissons * * * * "

"Iphigénie", Act V, scene 1, l. 1514.

Racine brings out his Jansenistic principles in Athalie, by showing that humanity fails when opposed to God. Athalie was working against those who had God on their side, and therefore fails in her purpose.

"Laisse là ton Dieu."

"Athalie", Act V, scene 5, l. 1739.

Pride which is so prominent in Corneille's women is not lacking in Racine. It is partly pride which makes Andromaque's faithfulness to her former husband so strong. In Iphigénie pride stands out more strongly than in any other of Racine's women. She is proud to be the daughter of a king, and in love with Achilles, but her love is not based entirely on pride. She twice uses the term "gloire" so common in Corneille.

"Sa gloire—son amour—mon père, mon devoir."

"Iphigénie", Act V, scene 2, l. 1989.

Her use of "gloire" however is not as egoistic as that of the Corneillean women, for Iphigénie means honor for all, not for herself. Eriphile also uses this expression.

"Souffrirai-je a là fois ta gloire et tes injures?"

"Iphigénie", Act II, scene 8, l. 759.

Phèdre likewise makes use of the term "gloire".

"Aurais-je perdu tout le soin de ma gloire?

"Phèdre", Act II, scene 5, l. 666.

Pride is one of the main characteristics of Eriphile who thinks Achilles prefers her to Iphigenie.

" * * * * Ou j'amime à me flatter,
Ou sur eux quelque orage est tout prêt d'éclater.
J' ai des yeuz. Leur bonheur n'est pas encore tranquille."

"Iphigénie", Act II, scene 8, l. 759-761.

The heroine of Racine's plays attracts practically all of the attention. In "Andromaque", however, Hermione draws almost as much interest as Andromaque. With the exception of Andromaque, Racine usually sacrifices all his personages to one, and in this way causes the passion to move toward its climax.

III. CONTRASTS BETWEEN CORNEILLE AND RACINE

The idea of will-power and reason which stands out so strongly in Corneille finds its opposite in Racine. The characters of Corneille have either mastered their passions, or struggle successfully to do so. Racine's characters let themselves be governed by their emotions. Corneille's idea was that duty should triumph over love; Racine's was the opposite, for with him love tirumphs over duty and reason.

Corneille differentiates little between his men and women, while Racine makes his women stand out in strong contrast to the men characters. It is for this reason that mention is so often made of the "Heroes of Corneille and Heroines of Racine". Corneille's women are manly for by the strength of their thoughts, their power of reasoning, and energetic perserverance they are more men than the men of Racine, who are often as emotional as are the women. Corneille's men and women bring out the heroic points in humanity and Racine's, the emotional.

Corneille and Racine both draw their plots from historical or mythological sources, but Corneille's characters have more reference to public life, and Racine's to private life. Corneille's characters are public heroes who sacrifice everything for honor and reputation. These traits are lacking in Racine's personages who are thus thrown back on their private emotions to which they give free rein.

Racine's women show more variety than Corneille's. The emotions of Racine's women are pictured in different aspects, whereas the reasoning of Corneille's women is almost the same in

each play. Corneille pictures life as it ought to be, and treats his characters in a general way. Racine's characters are treated individually, and represent life as it really is. It is in this way that Corneille's plays are idealistic and Racine's almost realistic.

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